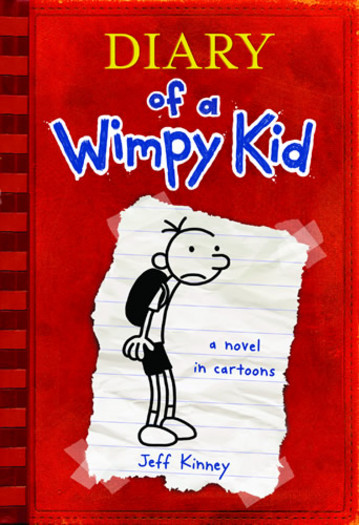
Chris Pifer



English 302

Literary Review

Diary of a Wimpy Kid

By: Jeff Kinney

The Diary of a Wimpy Kid series has become a quite a lightning rod over the past few years. Many people love the books but others think the stories and humor are crude and inappropriate. In the story, the main character, Greg Heffley is a young middle schooler. He makes sure to mention in the beginning that this was his mom’s idea and it is a journal, not a diary. In his journal, Greg talks about life in middle school and his life as a middle child. He describes all the horrors of middle school life, from being unpopular to feeling like the one person who hadn’t gone through puberty yet. His home life seems equally challenging. Greg describes how his younger brother, Manny, never gets in trouble even when he is clearly in the wrong and how his older brother, Rodrick, is constantly bullying him and getting the best of him. Throughout the story, Greg deals with disappointments and bullying but also has a few triumphs where he feels as though he has succeeded.

When I was reading this text, my first response was one of general annoyance. Granted I am 21 and do not fit in the target audience for this series. In most books that I read, I grow to feel a connection with the protagonist and start to view the story through his eyes as if I were him. In *Diary of a Wimpy Kid,* I never felt this way. Throughout the story, I found myself unable to really root for the main character because he had plenty of flaws himself, to the point that when he was describing all that was wrong in his world, I didn’t feel that bad for him. I felt that even though he had an awful older brother, he was almost equally terrible to his friend Rowley. I am no way saying that because of my personal emotional response to this book that no one else should read it, I am simply expressing how I felt about it as I read it. Many other people including Scott Parker, a writer and a father himself, love the books and read them to his son. He writes a glowing review that can be seen [here.](http://scottdparker.blogspot.com/2011/01/book-review-club-diary-of-wimpy-kid-by.html)

*Diary of a Wimpy Kid* is a mediocre book and story. The journal set up does a good job of letting Greg tell his story and Jeff Kinney does a good job of setting up the characters and themes. He doesn’t however, develop these characters. Greg remains a lazy, smart aleck 6th grader who doesn’t have any redeeming traits and the other characters don’t change or grow either. Kinney describes Greg’s family, friends and other classmates in ways that are relatable to most middle schoolers. He fulfills a lot of roles that many students see and relate to in their everyday lives. The style of writing in the book is effective as it uses vocabulary that is likely to be used by a middle schooler in a journal. The story flows very naturally and the journal setting can be appealing to many students because that’s something that they can do fairly easily. While I didn’t find the book appealing to myself, the story has proven to be very appealing to children. The student’s taste in books, reflects what they think is a good book. Even if I thought the whole thing was complete garbage and a waste of time, it wouldn’t matter to a 6th grader who really liked the story because he could relate to it and found it appealing. To him, that would be a good book. The same principal goes the other way, even if a book is critically acclaimed and structurally sound, it may not appeal to a student, and to them it wouldn’t be a good book. (Jacobs and Tunnell)

Throughout this book, I thought less and less of the plot from an originality standpoint. I thought that while I have never read another book like it, that didn’t necessarily make it imaginative. The story is basically a bunch of toilet humor, which does spark curiosity in middle school aged children, but I’m not sure how I feel about kids being attracted to a story because of its crude jokes. I’m torn on this topic because many people, such as Martha Cornog of the Library Journal, put *Diary of a Wimpy Kid* near the top of any reluctant readers list. (Cornog) The thing that I like the most about this book is its ability to reach students who are reluctant readers, students who go to the library and don’t see anything they like. However, it worries me that this is the type of literature that they get into. It is difficult for me to see the possibilities for growth past this series. It would be a dangerous pattern for students to only be reading crude toilet humor novels and never progress.

This book presents a few different themes and worldviews. *Diary of a Wimpy Kid* shows how you have to learn from your mistakes and how no one escapes problems in their life. It shows these themes through Greg but it doesn’t necessarily show him learning these lessons. These themes may not be as apparent without some discussion on them. There are lessons that can be learned from Greg but you have to dig for some of them.

I found the illustrations to be a strong point for this book. I thought the cartoon style really fit the mood and strengthened the book. The illustrations are very believable in that a 6th grader could produce something similar in a journal like the one Greg was keeping. Also, the lined pages added to the format and the sense that you could really be reading a journal. The black and white color scheme was realistic to a journal setting and fit in well. Another positive note for the illustrations is that they portray what is happening in the story very well and could be used as a tool by a struggling reader. A middle schooler who is struggling to read well would be able to use the illustrations to their advantage and not feel like an outcast for reading books that were intended for younger children. It’s a way to maintain some dignity as a struggling reader and a way to improve.

As an educator, I would not teach this book in my classroom. Even in a middle school setting, I wouldn’t be comfortable with the choice of humor in the book and I wouldn’t want my students to try and model how Greg acted in the book. I also would be concerned with parents being upset about the choice. Diary of a Wimpy Kid is nowhere near as controversial as, say, the Harry Potter series but you might get some grief from different parents who feel it is an inappropriate book to be taught. In the Jacobs and Tunnell article, it discusses how a teacher needs to encourage books that have both good literary merit and a positive student reaction and try to steer students towards some good literary pieces even if they might not be likely to have the most positive reaction to them. It also discusses how educators need to be understanding of books that students have a positive reaction to, even if they might not be great works of literature. If we don’t, they warn that a rift is likely to occur between the student and the teacher, and the student may not trust the teacher’s advice on books. (Jacobs and Tunnell) That is how I feel about *Diary of a Wimpy Kid*. I don’t think it is a great piece of literature that should be modeled to the entire class but if a student reads it and likes it, I’m not going to tell that student how they shouldn’t have read that story and how I had a negative reaction to it. It is important as a teacher to see the positive. Even if they read a book that you don’t like, at least they are reading recreationally. That is a positive step that you can build upon and grow towards better examples of literature.

Even though I do not think that *Diary of a Wimpy Kid* is classroom appropriate, there are some teachers who do. For instance, Alan Sitomer, who was the California Teacher of the Year in 2007, argues that Diary of a Wimpy Kid is a great choice for the classroom. He says, “I know that the state has hired me to teach the content standards. (They clearly say so.) And when they assess my student performance, the material they test is not text specific but rather, standards-based. This means that they are not going to be testing my kids on Kafka, Twain, and Joyce but rather on denotation vs. connotation, theme, tone and so on.” He goes on to say that while he is not arguing to replace Mark Twain’s work with it, he is saying that *Diary of a Wimpy Kid* can teach about literary devices and be enjoyed by most if not all students. Sitomer argues the importance of having fun while learning and achieving. (Sitomer) If you do choose to use this book in your classroom, click [here](http://www.teachervision.fen.com/childrens-book/diaries/28677.html) for a link to a resource guide for teachers.

*Diary of a Wimpy Kid* is a book that many middle schoolers have read or will read, it is a New York Time’s Best Seller and there is a feature film based on the series coming out soon. It is an entertaining and engaging book for 6th-8th graders and one that is especially helpful with reluctant readers. I do not believe that it is a great piece of literature, but not everything has to be. There is a place for Diary of a Wimpy Kid in our libraries, and whether we like it or not, it is going to be around, and popular, for a while.

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